



ONTOLOGICA

WINTER 2011  
ISSUE 3.2

# ONTOLOGICA

A Journal of Art and Thought

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## A Letter From the Editors

In this second issue of Vol. III, *Ontologica* continues to evolve as we have in every subsequent issue. We struggled in terms of Poetry editorship—the three remaining editors successfully pooled efforts to handle the poetry submissions for 3.2, but due to difficulties finding an appropriate and permanent Poetry Editor, this will be the last issue we run poetry for an indefinite amount of time. Readers' responses to the cancellation of our Poetry section will directly correlate to the amount of energy we put in to resurrecting it at a future date.

We seem to go through cycles in terms of submissions, and this reading period was no exception. We were light in fiction and art, but solid in essay submissions. I (Rod) had some tough choices to make in terms of acceptances and rejections, and hope one piece in particular is revised and re-submitted this spring.

Minor difficulties aside, this has turned into another solid issue of *Ontologica*. We have and a lot of great pieces, and as always our stalwart book reviewer, Kilean Kennedy. This was also our first year since the transition to a bi-annual publishing schedule, and the switch went great. Going forward, we will hold two reading periods each year—March-April for the Summer issue and September-October for the Winter issue. We've definitely found our groove in relation to content and vision. We'll be spending the winter brainstorming ways to increase our market presence, and considering the possibility of expanding the magazine into other (possibly non-electronic) forms of media.

Send us feedback, and be on the lookout for exciting things ahead.

Wishing you all a fantastic 2012,

-The Editors

Marian Kaplun Shapiro

## Old Photograph: No Place To Hide

Napalm has leveled the landscape.

The naked girl flees  
shredding her burning skin into the wind,  
screaming into the darkroom vat  
thousands of bloody bandages away. We smell her flesh.

We are the bomb-scarred trees.

My bones are charred by her fire.  
Its truth is not simple. But  
the Truth is simple  
as the ax  
as the air.

It is, simply, a matter of life and death.

It is, simply, a matter of holding our breath.

Claude Clayton Smith

## The Kanes of My Childhood

The Kanes of my childhood were related only in that each met a premature death.

Richard Kane lived across from us on Freeman Avenue in a boxlike house that seemed twice as large as our white clapboard bungalow. I was four at the time, my brother was six, and so Richard must have been eight or nine. He had an older sister, Nancy, who was in eighth grade and seemed old enough to be my mother. In fact, when I began Kindergarten, she played my mother in a Christmas tableau—Nancy in a rocking chair before the fireplace, me in my pajamas on her lap.

One afternoon Richard showed me his sister's room. Nancy was out, his mother in the kitchen, his father at work.

"This is where she puts on her make-up," Richard said as we stood before the mirror on Nancy's vanity. "And this is her powder-puff." He took the lid from a small round jar, lifted the soft bag within, and pretended to dab his cheeks. Then he got an idea. "Come on!" he cried, and I followed him downstairs to the kitchen. His mother was now out on the rear steps, hanging laundry from their clothesline.

Richard motioned for me to be quiet, reached into a cabinet, and grabbed a bag of marshmallows, which we used to powder our cheeks. Then we hid outside to surprise Nancy when she returned. But Richard's mother was more amused than Nancy, who screamed at Richard for going into her room.

The only photo I have of Richard Kane—a scalloped black and white Kodak *circa* 1950—shows us in his backyard, where we played often, with Richard in charge. In the photo he is about eleven or twelve, bare-chested and in shorts, his skinny arms holding a garden hose that is running full blast out of the frame just to the right of whoever is taking the picture, most likely his mother. His short black hair is unkempt, his gaze intense. I am standing beside him, and seated behind me on the first of the wooden steps is my older brother, the two of us in bib overalls and polo shirts. Richard looks

more concerned with his hosing than the fact that this moment is being recorded for posterity. My brother and I, with a childish sense of occasion, are smiling sheepishly.

One day we had a funeral and Richard presided. He had found a dead bird and put it in a shoebox. Next he dug a hole, deposited the box, and insisted we be quiet while he said a few words in a serious tone. Then he covered the box with dirt, and that was that.

That's all I remember about Richard Kane, because the Kanes moved away that summer. But one day a few years later my mother informed us that Richard had been killed in an accident when his speeding car struck a telephone pole.

He was sixteen years old.

\* \* \*

Frankie Kane was gaunt and pimply, with gnarled teeth and a thatch of black hair. He came from a broken family and was already a teenager when I knew him. Knew *of* him, that is, for I never spoke to him. I simply envied him from afar, like everyone else.

Frankie lived at the upper reaches of Freeman Avenue, less than a mile away. But we never went up there because Old Lady Jober lived nearby, and Old Lady Jober was a witch. It was said she had murdered her daughter, that dead cats were chained at the neck in her basement. Live cats roamed her property at will, and Frankie Kane could be seen playing with them.

One afternoon fire engines roared up Freeman Avenue and we took off after them. Old Lady Jober's ramshackle garage was on fire. It had been filled to the rafters with stacks of old newspapers. Frankie Kane stood out front with his arms folded, watching the flames. Old Lady Jober was nowhere to be found. The crowd grew steadily, and soon a member of the family (Old Lady Jober's daughter?) appeared out of nowhere and spoke to the firemen. A few days later the house stood empty, although Frankie still tended to the cats.

We envied Frankie Kane because he owned a pony, a shaggy black-and-white Shetland that he harnessed to a two-wheeled cart to give the littlest children rides around the block. Horses were unknown in our town— except for an old nag that

annually plowed our garden on Freeman Avenue—yet we all longed to have one, like the cowboys on TV. And Frankie Kane had his own pony. He kept it in a garage like Old Lady Jober's, which he had converted to an open stall stacked with bales of hay. Whenever the pony cart went around the block I stood by the side of the road conspicuously, trying to look inconspicuous, as if I deserved a ride as much as the littlest children. But Frankie Kane never looked my way.

And we envied Frankie Kane because he had been on television, displaying a talent for which he was known locally—puppetry. He made hand puppets all by himself, built a little stage with a red curtain, and put on comic shows for the littlest children, in a falsetto voice. He seemed to live for the littlest children. He had no friends his own age.

When Frankie appeared on television with his puppets, we gathered at our house to watch him in all his glory. After the performance, the master of ceremonies interviewed him, asking how his hobby had begun. "Oh, just messin' around by myself," Frankie said. Frankie Kane was always messing around by himself. He was our wonder boy. He had a pony, he made puppets, and he had been on television. And one day he was found behind his pony stall with a plastic bag over his head.

He was sixteen years old.



Luthien Thye

## Nimloth of Eressea



Like many who discovered art at a later age in their lives, I have never been to art school nor had any formal training in art. In fact, my early education couldn't be farther away from anything that resembled "artistic" or "creative", unless you consider "creative book-keeping" an art form! – Luthien Thye

Rosalind Brenner

## Naturalized Citizen

Mom's goulash patriotism inspired us.  
 On her happy days she loved America,  
 rushed outside at the knife grinder's call,  
 crooned show tunes as she danced  
 with her full wicker basket,  
 tugged the clothes line on its pulley,  
 laughed at its creaky complaint  
 at heavy sheets and girdles.  
 Radio perched on the ice box's  
 round compressor sang with her, followed  
 every high heeled step she rehearsed  
 for rumba party Saturdays  
 when dad would take her stepping out  
 sporting beauty parlor curls and her Wilardy purse.

Should I be glad that she's not here to see  
 our Brooklyn block is slum now?  
 Windows are nailed with boards like blinded eyes,  
 the middle class knocked off its ass,  
 and her adopted country stripped to bone.

The cops find garbage bags  
 stuffed with Craig's List's dead;  
 kids text for profit, fun with dangerous ends;  
 the rich collect their dividends.

The planet's pocked with lethal scrap.  
Cheeks raw from weeping radioactive tears—

Tsunami hasn't reached my ankles yet  
but I can feel the churn. Time to believe  
a good warm stew will save us,  
vanished with foundation garments,  
and bi-monthly permanent waves.

Haris Merzihic

## Chair



Art has always played a big role in my life. It was passed down to me from my father who always liked to draw and my uncle who is an artist. I am hoping that my children will like art as much and will carry on the tradition. I have been drawing since the age of one. When the war started, the role of art became even greater in my life. It was an escape from reality, which at the time looked very bleak. It was also an escape from boredom as we were left with nothing and a pencil and paper are very cheap compared to toys or anything else a kid might want. So I would find myself drawing for hours. Just as children from Brazil become good soccer players because there is nothing to do but kick a ball around, I improved my art skills because there was nothing else to do. Still today, art can be an escape from reality for me and it is a great form of relaxation. Although I have less time to spend on art today, it will always be a big part of my life. – Haris Merzihic

Kimberly Dark

## Celebration

I sat cross-legged on the big blue tumbling mat, fingering the white piping on the green gym shorts we had to wear. Those were the school colors: green and white. The shirt had green and white horizontal stripes along with the words Dana Junior High School. I stared intently down at that piping along the edge of my shorts, as though it was fascinating me beyond belief as the teacher spoke about the perils of getting fat. There were health perils to be sure, but then, she added a particular caution for girls. “You don’t ever want to be known as 200 pounds of fun.” Then everyone laughed. I was touching the edge of my gym shorts which pressed gently into the flesh of my upper thigh because the biggest size they came in – extra large – was a bit snug on my body. I was already too fat, and nearing 200 pounds myself.

200 pounds. That’s the number people used to describe REALLY fat girls: a 200 pound heifer, a 200 pound circus act, everyone laughed about 200 pounds of fun. She was dressed in a tutu: the circus performer painted on the side of the fun house at the fair grinning moronically with her pinkened cheeks, tight leotard, the pink laces of her ballet shoes cutting into her fleshy calves. My face reddened every time I walked past her image at the fair. And by high school, I weighed more than 200 pounds, and though I’d never mention it – I knew she did too.

Boy athletes got to weigh 200 pounds and it was a good thing. I hated the number 200, though as a 5’9” active adult with ample breasts and hips, I realized that 200 pounds was not such a bad thing for me – not so unhealthy, not so moronic, and not so shameful. But it still felt that way.

Through years of exercise obsession in my late teens and early twenties, I always weighed in between 230-250. I was unbelievably strong and worked out a few hours each day – aerobics and weights. Again and again, I offered my waistline for caliper pinching to check my body fat percentage. One gym staffer after another would

do the math and report that I had some weight to lose to achieve my optimal “healthy body fat percentage.” The numbers varied, but those tests always put my weight loss goal between ten and twenty pounds – not the hundred pounds the fashion magazines would rob from my frame to make me small enough for public privilege. No, even at a “healthy body fat percentage” I’d still be designated as heifer size, still 200+. I’d be healthy livestock, still 200 pounds of fun for those who want to laugh at others for invented reasons.

“I’m not into celebrating fatness,” my friend said in an offhand way. “I think it’s essentially out of balance, unhealthy,” he added as we discussed an event where a number of fat people had congregated, nicely dressed, comfortably flirtatious with one another, giving and receiving compliments like “You look great tonight!” And, “I love that dress on you. Rawr!”

I don’t know very many people who celebrate fatness. Some fetishize it, but legions more have a fetish for thinness. That is, their sexual gratification is strongly linked to the presence of that attribute, rather than the person’s composite traits. Indeed, some people celebrate fat. Well, great. It’s the same as celebrating hairy chests or big noses or thick muscles. It’s one way the body can be – either through genetics or behavior. Some people eroticize fat – they think it feels soft, good, comforting. A fondness for large breasts is a form of fat celebration, really. It’s just fat in a certain shape – but if the boobs are attached to a lithe frame, the longing becomes legitimate.

So, I don’t know many fat celebrants, but thankfully, I’ve met a lot of people who’ve learned how to love themselves and each other in a variety of forms. I know people who revel in their sexuality and live vibrantly in bodies we’ve all been taught to hate.

It’s not a celebration of the fat itself. They celebrate the amazing courage and daring it takes to live in a culture that compares you to livestock when you’re fat, that considers getting fat to be one of the worst things that can happen – to a woman in particular. In study after study, thin women report being more willing to lose things like limbs and eyesight than to be “extremely overweight.” It’s worth celebration and



admiration when someone overcomes that kind of thinking. Those are the folks I know. And I know some bigots too – some really nice ones. Mostly, they just don't know that being bigoted includes holding firmly to the idea that *any* group is wrong or disgusting for being as they are. Being bigoted includes being irrationally convinced of the correctness of one's own opinions or views. I've been a bigot at times too, by that definition.

Truly, I'd be more comfortable if I weren't quite as fat. Now that I'm in my forties, my knees hurt and during my yoga practice, some poses aren't accessible to me because of my size. It's just not as easy for me to be thin, as it is for some of my friends. For whatever reason, I've put some of my life issues into food and eating – and I seem to have a genetic propensity for largesse. And who knows? The slower metabolism may have been enhanced by my years of anorexia as a girl. Shortly after the gym teacher's comment, I stopped eating almost entirely for a few years. Oh, the tactic of anorexia was not a simple response to her threat that I would be ugly and unloved. What I chose to eat and not eat was a response to a nexus of events and messages that emerged in my life at the time. Interestingly, those events emerge in the lives of a lot of adolescent girls. If we truly mean to be helpful – to focus on fat as "unhealthy" or "unbalanced," we might pay attention to the repetitive patterns.

Maybe blame is just easier. Fat and emaciation look like cause and effect situations that are under one's personal control. But I suspect that many women were not just responding to the gym teacher's threats. We were trying to sort out the multifarious meanings of controlling our bodies and our lives, as we became women. We were struggling to make peace with what it means to hunger – how the body and mind can be brought under control, or nourished, or indulged. Women aren't just worried about losing (or gaining too much) beauty "privilege," though that's part of it. We're worried about things we can't even name – things I'm still challenged to name after decades of careful observation.

Here's what I do know about my body. It conserves well, in case of further scarcity. What a serendipity. How beautiful that I survived the perils of terrors unnamed. How fortunate for me – and for others – that I thrive. Some forms of

"imbalance" are easier to live with in our particular culture than others. Fat is a tough one, for people of any gender. So in certain company we celebrate not only our audacity, but also our beauty – our right to enjoy our bodies, our sensuality, and our sexuality.

I don't know too many people who celebrate fat, but I do know fat people who celebrate being alive, being resilient, being beautiful. In fact, I'm one of them. And I feel a little sad for friends who don't want to join the celebration.

Valentina Cano

## Inhospitable Terrain

I am not involved in  
 your map of plans.  
 I refuse to have my name  
 stitched in the roads,  
 crosses marking spots  
 I don't want to travel.  
 Your landscape is not warm enough.  
 It teems with ice sculptures  
 and overturned buckets of water.  
 The trees are born of glass seeds  
 that just stretch, molten, into shape.  
 Your words, your looks,  
 have painted that place  
 a lick of frost at a time.  
 I cannot march down  
 your road  
 or through your peaking valleys.  
 I will not drink from  
 your crackling shores.

Luthien Thye

## Time Turner II



The first medium I learned how to use was acrylic paint. Paper followed shortly and then, polymer clay. I started out making things for the home, later going into creating jewelry and journals. I use an array of mediums in my work. Paint will always have a place in my work ... it is like an old friend. I love aged papers, whether they be original ephemera or papers made to look old with staining techniques. I find that they exude character and soul. Clay is another medium that I find extremely delightful and versatile to use. I do not work with polymer clay anymore as cooking polymer clay is forbidden in the home now that I have a 1 year old baby. But I have found that 2-part epoxy clays are fascinating to

play with. They are excellent for sculpting, and they are paintable, which suits me just fine. – Luthien Thye

Thomas Larson

## The Celebrity Author: Fame = Credibility

1.

The most fun I've had on the Internet of late has been watching YouTube broadcasts, uploaded from [celebrityautobiographies.com](http://celebrityautobiographies.com). Subtitled "We Couldn't Make This Stuff Up!" the site archives and advertises performances of some eighty-four live "readings," among them Kristin Wiig doing a selection from The Early Poems of Suzanne Somers, whose sexed-up spiritual poetry includes—"If anyone has any extra love/ Even a heartbeat/ Or a touch or two/ I wish they wouldn't waste it on dogs"—and Mario Cantone's raucous rendition of Prairie Tale: A Memoir by Melissa Gilbert, whose opening has Gilbert spotting Rob Lowe one day in Hollywood circa 1984, falling "totally" in love with him, starting a "relationship" which is buoyed by "profound" sex, then confronting him weeks later when she discovers his affair with Natasha Kinski: "I walked up to Rob, put my finger in his face, and said very calmly and slowly, 'You don't *fuck* with America's sweetheart.'"

Nobody except me takes this tripe seriously. Indeed, why should these books be seen as anything other than the rhinestone jewelry of fame? Most TV celebrities are as ridiculous for what they're famous for as they are ridiculous for their "writing," which, in most cases, is not theirs at all. It's inanely penned by a ghostwriter either to sound like them, to belittle them, or both. Even if the celebs get the joke, it doesn't matter. It's not like a narcissist has any pride capable of being wounded.

With apologies to Suzanne Somers, who once swooned at the feet of Rod McKuen, virtually none of these memoirs, as I say, is written by the star herself. They, book and celeb, need all the help they can get. A parallel hell is the celebrity novel, a lesser-known stratum in the underworld: Nicole Richie has had two novels published, the Kardashians sold their first novel to William Morrow, and earlier this year Snooki of MTV's Jersey Shore came out with A Shore Thing. Snooki told the New York Times that



yes, she wrote the book, even though (I'm not sure this is relevant) she said she had read only two books in her life: Twilight and Dear John ([Horyn](#)). To the Today show's Matt Lauer, she defended her writing of the book by saying, "Because if you read it, you'll know from the first page that I wrote it. Cause, like, it's all my language" (["Matt Lauer, Snooki, and Badonk"](#)). (Is she saying that if you read it, you'll know how bad her language is—a badge of honor—and you'll be convinced she must have written it?) After enduring further lame-stream-media questions, she admitted to a co-author. One i-Reporter (guy with a microphone and a camera buddy) asked attendees at Snooki's Manhattan book signing some stupid questions, one of which was, who were their top three favorite authors, besides Snooki. "I don't know," said one Guidette with a dismissive flip. "I don't read" (["Snooki Book Signing"](#)). The sentiment seemed to speak for everyone he asked. The Times' [Julie Bosman](#) dug into the phenomenon, interviewing several publishers who insisted these celebrity books came from ghostwriters with the celebs contributing elements of the plot. One literary agent wondered whether such books take money, marketing, and editing away from "legitimate novelists." (It was a wonder, not a complaint.) Obviously, they do. Why do celebrities lie and say/believe they have written their books? They're unable to differentiate between the collaborative team and a self. After all Snooki is one of six stars of Jersey Shore, whose cameras showcase her and the other dim bulbs constantly. Crews and publicists, editors and publicists all work for the "talent" whose names and faces pay their wages. Into that stew falls the novel's co-author. Publishers agree to such projects, in part, because they want a movie or TV series based on the book. To play, they must pay between \$200,000 and \$1 million advances, and the book has to be written quickly and be easily marketable to the audience who've bought the package. Invariably, the heroine of these novels is someone whose persona of wacky gullibility is the spitting image of the star's image.

Gauging the ubiquity of these books, we need to see the author not as a writer but as a corporate entity. Corporately authored books, not writerly ones, get the ad budget and make the big money. Roughly half of the New York Times' nonfiction bestseller list, the blockbusters, is comprised of books "written by" people who possess

celebrity, who are known for anything but reflection or crafting plots, and who hire co-authors, ghostwriters, or as-told-to's with whom—the surrogate-mother metaphor is not far off—they make a book. It's tough to tell sometimes whether there is a co-author; one must examine the acknowledgments page to find out and even then the reference may be murky. Some publishers admit to dual authorship on the cover, many do not. It's considered gauche in fiction, OK in nonfiction—the seriousness of the latter, the frivolousness of the former. The most famous co-author, whose name appears boldly on the cover because she has become a celebrity co-author herself (the next incarnation), is Lynn Vincent. The Christian writer, who only works with Christians and conservatives, has co-authored, or entirely written, among others, Going Rouge by Sarah Palin, Heaven is For Real by Todd Burpo, and Same Kind of Different As Me by Denver Moore and Ron Hall.

At Amazon's Top 100 list, we find a hodge-podge of print titles, again half of which are co-authored. There are books on weight-loss, dog-raising, Christian belief, keys to success, and being a healthier you; there are athlete memoirs, rocker autobiographies, dystopic fantasies, and vampire chapter books; and there is the factory-hack James Patterson who has a stable of contract-silenced co-authors who pen his books' first drafts. (A few literary novels, high-school classics, a Dr. Seuss, and other "written" potboilers round out the list.) What do these co-authored, now also available as e-books, have in common? They are slight. Many, if not most, are inspirational. In lieu of a theme, they possess a *message*, a healing one at that: usefulness is the work's primary value. They promise a feel-good reading experience, devoid of literature's abstruseness. Many are based on or follow contemporary fads, current events, and movie tie-ins. Three-fourths of Amazon's Top 100 are nonfiction. Of the fiction, most are in the fantasy camp, textual likenesses of the movie Avatar. Most are nonliterary (we might say anti-literary as in anti-complex or unchallenging). Of the nonfiction, much is written quickly at an eighth-grade reading level, bullet-pointed, and stylistically banal. What these books avoid in elegance or complication they make up for in simple-minded subject matter. And their common denominator is that almost all are tied to their electronic media source, where the book was birthed and on whose platform the

book towers above the rest. Popular print books (and this will be true for e-book versions as they take over) are textual representations of visual and auditory media familiars. A writer, working alone in his or her silent domain, is not essential to the product.

Whether these co-authored bestsellers rehash the plots of a TV series like C.S.I. or they celebrate the pluckiness of those thrust into the spotlight (no one thought of Aerosmith's Steven Tyler as a celebrity author [least of all Tyler] until the promised broadcast of his wizened, old-lady face and virgin-hungry leer on American Idol secured his tell-all book deal), they are conceived, produced, and marketed via the centrifugal group-mind of media collaboratives. Such craftily built, multiplatformed relationships circumnavigate a number of iPhone-ing and texting contributors: agents and co-authors, marketers and handlers, publicists hitting up TV talk shows and TV talk shows fawning over celebrities.

With such a Big Tent definition, it's easy to see and say that *all bestsellers* are celebrity authored. The book is produced only because the celebrity's previously (or about to be) created TV audience can be sold to. My tortured syntax mimics how such authorship works—celebrities, like advertisers and TV programs, deliver products to viewers: one item is a book whose author's unlikely bookishness is its message. (Footballer John Madden's Hey, Wait a Minute, I Wrote a Book.) This direct link to audiences is true because bestselling books cannot reach such high status unless they are/will be familiar to TV audiences, and they cannot reach such big sales unless they are marked down at grocery stores, Wal-Marts, and Targets, where the TV crowd shop and most books are sold. Thus, bestselling books are subsidiaries of the recent or present capital event, their covers recalling last month's TV screens. This is no different from the professional sports franchise whose coffers grow not on the "beauty" of the game or the "winning" record of the team but on the barrage of co-related, long-tailed, everyday products whose moment to sell is tied to the seasonality of the American marketplace. Baseball books sell in the spring, novels in early summer, religious books in late fall. Books that outsell other books are timed to sell something bigger than the book—Tyler's memoir spurs interest in Idol, not the other way around. To conceive the

corporately authored book, there has to be something more monetarily inducing than the book itself, which requires the book be written and, only then, necessitates a writer.

2.

Without their own TV shows, “novel” authors Snooki, Lauren Conrad (L.A. Candy), Hilary Duff (Elixir), and Pamela Anderson (Star) would have been rejected by publishers. With nothing to tie the book’s sale to, such novels cannot be marketed. It’s not that a bad book can’t be marketed. It’s that a bad book without a name or a media-attuned subject has no market. In the normal realm, an authoress (her male counterpart as well) who writes a bad book and is not famous we call a writer *manqué*, a “would be,” a woman who is unfulfilled in manifesting her capabilities or desires *as a writer*. But here I’m not sure that the shattered dream of the would-be novelist (is the *manqué* untalented or unfulfilled?) makes sense in their cases. Were they *not* celebrities, I suspect, they would not have thought “writing a novel” was possible or worth their time. Who else thought these TV sex toys could write a novel except a publisher, an agent, a personal assistant, a packager, a hired gun, and probably not the celeb?

Each of these female celebrity novelists are not “would-be” authors. They are the opposite of the *manqué*: they “will be” authors because they are known, even beloved (not as writers but as personalities). They “will never be” frustrated authors, *à la* the *manqué*, because they “will be” published. Just say the word. If these women can’t go through the travails and/or falseness of the hack or dilettante, then I’m afraid there’s nothing *manqué* about them.

This is a big change, to move from *would-be* to *will-be*. It reveals a completely different path to authorship than via writing. Even stranger, the authorship we’re talking about here—say the Sir Charles Barkley sort—has nothing to do with Barkley writing. In fact, not only did he not write a word of his four books during and after his NBA career, he also famously stated that he had no interest in reading his autobiography, I May Be Wrong But I Doubt It.

And yet, despite this idiocy, celebrity grants one writerly merit. This is the perversity at the heart of being known: fame confers credibility as its first and widest-ranging fact. What's more, fame allows you to do those things you wanted to do that were barred to you when (or because) you weren't famous.

The non-famous writer can't get published.

The famous nonwriting person can.

In the first case, the writer can only get published on the merit of the writing.

In the second, the merit of the writing has nothing to do with it.

I want to associate this merit of the writing to the French theorist, Jean Baudrillard: "The very definition of the real has become," he writes in *Simulations* (his italics), "*that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*" (146). In other words, for Pamela Anderson (a slightly dated but telling example) to write a novel need not be anything more than "an equivalent reproduction" of a novel; in fact, it has to be "an equivalent reproduction" of a novel written by the nonwriting celebrity, Pamela Anderson. Her 2005 novel has garnered some eighty-one "customer reviews," at Amazon.com, evenly split along the one-to-five critical spectrum. Many of the reviews are as confused as they are revealing. One, entitled "Too many inconsistencies," reads,

I wonder who edited this book? I really wanted to like it too, but it was all over the place. In the beginning, Star is described as a natural athlete who is super smart, then she is described as not a natural at anything but a really dedicated hard worker, and finally, she is described as someone who didn't work hard enough and wasn't really good at anything. And that's just in the first five chapters! I just can't figure out why nobody else picked up on all of the inconsistencies. (That was just one example!) I know this is fiction, and I have to give Anderson credit for writing a book, but it comes off as unpolished, and I really blame whoever told her that it was ready for print. A little bit more time and it could have been a really entertaining read! Don't waste your time, it's not worth it. And Pam, if you are going to write another book, find a new ghost writer and editor!

The fact that the reviewer found that the novel needed editing confirms, in the reviewer's mind, that she, the ditzy celeb, wrote it, although that's not exactly right. As I say, the trick is to make it sound like her: to dumb it down and dumb it up so the resemblance is clear. The more Anderson's novel simulates what we think her novel should be—a book about girls in bikinis having sex with some bad guys whose nefarious plot they wiggle out of as well as those bikinis—the more it becomes an equivalent, an authentication, of her and her image, the core replication the celebrity-authored book reproduces. That's why, in terms of audience interest, there's no need to sell the book and why there's no need to hire an editor: it comes off as goofily written by Pam Anderson. The point is, the novel already exists in the imaginations of those, fans or not, who actually read it. The book, like any simulation, exists as "*that which is always already reproduced*" (Baudrillard). No different from the formulaic plots and jiggle moments of Baywatch, Anderson's Star is already present (even the title is an iteration, in case we missed it), already conceived as the thing we (used to) go to Baywatch to watch—her Starness. In a sense, the novel has already been written because it occupies no other place than what it simulates. What it simulates is its reality.

Fame is the endlessness of reproduction, engineered by a conspiracy of replicas among dozens of media, many alive. Thus, the Pamela Anderson doll, joke, swimsuit, laugh, hair sweep, novel, TV series, personal appearance, issue engagement (she has famously lent her cleavage to save animals, beings she chooses not to eat, a position rife with Puritanical irony: a sexualized body, undefiled by meat), and the ditzy girlie talk the reality TV cameras linger over in close-ups. Only when the reproductive largesse grows widespread enough does her credibility emerge. It's bigger than viral; it's archetypal. Celebrity cred is itself a kind of accomplishment cred: the body of fame, replicating person and product, manufacturing expectation and satiety, re-seeding each serving size until another body with a wider simulation comes along and displaces it. Consumption fosters credibility because we value (and are addicted to) the endlessness and the unchangeableness of what we consume: The same great cup of coffee, hot dogs on the Fourth of July, presidential candidates who submit themselves to the will of their handlers.



3.

Literature, the books our tradition says we have read and should read, possess a kind of fame that transcends the temporary, though substantial, renown the celebrity-authored book enjoys. The idea of literature's slow fame (like slow food) has been co-opted by the fast fame (like fast food) of the instant classic. The fastest way in is for authors to proclaim their self-worth by using (any) sudden notoriety as a means to merchandizing their self-esteem and to publication. When authors (those not, as yet, anointed by TV) take celebrity into their own hands, we get the unimaginably "real" story (Hitler's Diaries, for instance), whose ubiquitous exposure becomes, or is set up in advance to become, the fuel that fires the raging first sell, then withdrawal, of the book. James Frey, for example, purposely misled his readers, though his publisher, we come to know, was in on the scam; one meta-reader, Oprah Winfrey, didn't take kindly to the trick. Other self-aggrandizing hoaxes include the made-up "Holocaust memoirs" of Misha DeFonseca and Herman Rosenblat, ploys "based on a true story" that profited off deified misery before they were exposed and cancelled. And the bizarre case of Laura Albert.

In 2000, Albert published a novel, Sarah, under the pseudonym, J.T. Leroy. Albert imagined the writer Leroy to be the son of a truck-stop hooker who was sexually abused and drug-addicted and became, while still a teenager, a male hustler. The novel garnered much notoriety, in part, because its semi-autobiographical narrative posited a "real" young man, the author, who an enquiring public/media wanted to meet. Albert, scrambling to find a living version of Leroy, asked a cousin, Savannah Knoop, to impersonate Leroy at public appearances. The catch was, Knoop had to disguise herself as Leroy, a homeless transgender male prostitute; she donned a flat-brim hat, blonde wig, and dark glasses, the bruise-hiding kind. Albert got into the act by becoming one of two alter egos, Speed and Emily, accompanying Leroy/Knoop at his/her personal appearances. The pair, Albert and Knoop, eventually conned several Hollywood celebrities with whom they hung out and were photographed, the goal of many corporate authors. At one point, Leroy/Knoop said she/he or she/she was HIV-positive

and received donations for her condition. Albert sold the screen rights of her novel to a film company but, once the fraud was revealed in 2006, the company sued her in what was labeled a “postmodern trial.” Albert claimed that a lifetime of abuse and low self-esteem culminated in her making up the Leroy alter ego ([Cornell](#)). At one point, she said, Leroy “wanted his own body,” so she enlisted the actress Knoop to play the part. In the end, Albert was found guilty of fraud. Knoop eventually wrote a memoir about the whole affair, Girl Boy Girl, arguing that her self-worth had been lost and found by the scam. With classic insincerity, Albert, who hated Knoop for writing a book that capitalized on Albert’s theater, called Knoop’s memoir “sad” and “sleazy.” (Throughout this “scandal,” I have heard no one who has covered the story and none of the key players speak of reading either of these books.)

Albert’s and Knoop’s cases are two examples among dozens in which fraudulent authorship outs the artist/writer and forces her contrition. The result of this Gordian knot is to spawn a post-fame credibility which the artist/writer uses to legitimize herself as an author. Jayson Blair was the New York Times’ reporter, outed and ousted for plagiarism, and whose 2004 autobiography, Burning Down My Master’s House, pits his undiagnosed bipolar disorder against his confessional rectitude, implicating his master’s house as the culture in which his illness flourished. Today he is a “certified life coach” with Web site and blog.

Recently, I edited a woman writer and her self-published religious memoir. In it, she strove to make the tenets of her church and her faith conform to her experiences, a kind of post-dated revelation of her destiny, given credence by the watchful eye of Jesus Christ, her guardian angel. Much of the writing has a first-draft quality; some pages are quite well done. But what struck me more than the relative quality of the work is that *first* she published and *second* the rite of publication may have revealed the work’s uneven quality to her. The latter move, apparently, led her to seek my editing service. Strangely, self-publishing may have legitimized her effort, making her a celebrity of her own doing, so that she might then seek guidance. The idea of writing and publishing a flawed book has something of the prideful act and anticipated forgiveness central to Christian redemption.

The notion of self-mediated and self-proclaimed self-worth is the newest driver of contemporary authorship—more so than that which drives the actual writing, an effort which most would say *leads* to self-worth, or better, the discovery that one's experiences have meaning, which the assiduously confounding work of memoir will bring about.

In a world now where anyone can publish—and it seems everyone does—we stand out from the crowd only when we make ourselves heard more loudly than our writing. We get heard via all those other out-loud media *which are not writing*. Broadcasting our self-worth says that being heard is our primary goal while artistic quality is secondary. To be heard is to be believed, to be credible. (Ask the victim of physical or sexual abuse.) Furthermore, being heard and establishing credibility are functions of our broadcasting arm—an electronic presence, social media status, a blog, a tweet following, self-updates. We possess worth because we have established ourselves online and, perhaps, in publication, and not because our writing makes us worthy. Who wants to wait for artistic legitimacy, which may or may not come from twenty-five years of the stone-splitting work of writing. There has to be an easier way. Or, put better, the Internet and the market for written work grants us an easier way: place our personality in front of our creativity and our notices will grow.

This idea is echoed in the documentary, The New Shock of the New, completed in 2004 by the art critic, Robert Hughes. The hour-long film updates his 1980 BBC series, The Shock of the New. It is fascinating to hear Hughes grumble about what art has become, since 1980, and especially post-9/11, much of it grumble-worthy. Despite the attack on the twin towers, he says, artists in the 2000s are not interested in social issues, war, suffering, history, culture, or the environment. None of that is reflected in their concerns. If anything, Hughes says, their pieces “tell of the artist's own personal phobias. You only have to go to a big survey show of contemporary art, like the Whitney Biennial in New York, to see that it's all become rather bloated. Artists seeking to make an impact with an instant hit, anything to stand out from the crowd, anything that says, ‘Look, here I am, I have arrived, I am different.’ Whatever it is, it's about making an immediate impact, about fast gettable and sellable images.” Fame.

Notoriety. Celebrity. The mine-and-mine-only renown that has sanctified Julian Schnabel and Damian Hurst. In the film, Hughes's disgust is visceral as he interviews the "most famous" (i.e., the highest-priced) artist in America, Jeff Koons. Koons says his work is informed by Michelangelo and Titian but Hughes doesn't buy it. Puppies and chimps and porn stars in tacky remakes of scenes from art history are not meaningful, Hughes argues irritatingly, least of all because Koons says they possess cultural significance. A market fact, Koons' art (much of it produced by teams of interns) sells more when Koons declaims himself the pinnacle, the logical terminus, of all previous art movements and personalities. Such hype ensures the public will believe anything an artist says about his work. An easily wowed public quickly discounts its own estimation of what art is supposed to be.

The new authorship suggests that you must traverse many roads to get to the mountaintop, but you must devote most of your time to establishing your brand. Authorship is the result of becoming the kind of person whose priority is not necessarily writing but is doing whatever it takes to achieve self-renown so that you earn, or stumble upon (accidents are acceptable), the authorship you deserve. All paths are equal, too. A documentary film, a one-person show rejected by the Whitney, a reality TV show, preferably "Celebrity Rehab," an aging rock band, a Web empire, a spiritual transformation, simulated sex with a married congressman, the life-saving slicing-off of your own arm: and don't forget those public-speaking engagements at which you, the wounded healer, sell your line of DVDs, workbooks, and online counseling. Ask Anthony "Tony" Robbins, the sales king. He never set out to write. But as the disaffected hordes discovered him and he discovered how eager they were for the Pollyannaish belief in themselves he peddled to them, Tony—and the as-told-to he hired to be his doppelganger in print—became a writer.

On your way up, stay branded, my friends.

4.

In 1934, Ezra Pound wrote in the ABC of Reading that "More writers fail from lack of character than from lack of intelligence" (193). Character issues from the

person; intelligence from her learning. The world's great artists are, for Pound, strong personalities whose mastery is bred of their character, their ability to "make it new." Perhaps these days, authorship is the perverse extension of Pound's insight.

But I wonder whether character adequately accounts for the technological revolution in creating and disseminating the arts in this century. For all his wisdom, Pound is enthralled by the soloist. He has little consciousness that the writer evolves in compliance with an audience, a culture, and the technology of his environment. I think our age of interactivity is forecasted best by C. G. Jung in his 1930 essay, "Psychology and Literature," which appears in The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature. In it, Jung argues that "the essence of a work of art is not to be found in the personal idiosyncrasies that creep into it—indeed, the more there are of them, the less it is a work of art—but in it[s] rising above the personal and speaking from the mind and heart of the artist to the mind and heart of mankind" (101). He goes on:

Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is 'man' in a higher sense—he is 'collective man,' a vehicle and mold of the unconscious psychic life of mankind. (101)

With Jung, we still hear the inevitable, Romantic focus on the "higher man," the strong personality. But Jung goes further. The artist partakes of the "collective man," a spirit or force within us which our psychic lives and creative communities evolve and which are, in effect, more responsible for our "success" than we are. That the culture appropriates the artist to do its bidding Jung condenses into the aphorism, "It is not Goethe that creates *Faust*, but *Faust* that creates Goethe."

Jung's idea offers a key to how the artist/writer is hooked by celebrity, his own or someone else's. The *how* combines our media, our Internet presence, and our devices with our desires to be heard and seen—as we believe those who "matter" are heard and seen. The screen is larger than us, and it is collective, transcendently electric. Marshall McLuhan understood this fifty years ago. The Wikipedia article on his

classic book, The Gutenberg Galaxy, summarizes an idea fundamental to McLuhan: "Technologies are not simply inventions which people employ, but are the means by which people are reinvented." As our technologies reinvent us, we follow their connectedness; we have no choice. To paraphrase Jung, it is not our individual desire as artists that may reach an infinite Web-based audience via a memoir, a music video, or a documentary film, but our technologies that promise access to that infinite audience and, in turn, create our desire for it. The fact that thousands of dealers and collectors across the world want kitsch art creates a Jeff Koons. The fact that millions of adolescents and young adults insist musical artists mix video, dance, fashion, modeling, runway culture, and sexual ambiguity creates the multimedia phenomenon, Lady Gaga. The fact that Christian Americans feel under attack by secularists and the "lame-stream" media creates a Sarah Palin who, in turn, mirrors those often uninformed, principled values Christians recognize. The media tries to convince us that Tea Party consciousness has been collectivized by Palin and, thus, *she*, not it, needs covering. Obviously, it's easier to focus on a personality than a movement's multi-voiced complexity. Applying Jung's prescription, it's not that Sarah Palin creates the Tea Party, but the Tea Party that creates Sarah Palin.

It should be clear by now that (we) artists and authors are the products of media technologies whose collective mission—its *cloud*, if you will—is to enthrall us with celebrity, with celebrities, and, thus, to foster our inner idol. And yet aren't the odds of being chosen an idol hopelessly slim? If fame is so fickle, why do most people believe that each will get his or her shot? Indeed, the ubiquity of fame is a counterintuitive idea. There's room for only a few at a time: the one lucky guy rescuers pull out alive after the West Virginia coal mine disaster, the wife of Anthony Weiner, a child tortured and murdered in Syria.

What to do while waiting for the van from Publisher's Clearinghouse?

Simple. You self-organize. You use the social media network of professionals, LinkedIn, which advertizes, "Build your empire, create your success." You put the time into staying linked. Otherwise, you don't exist. Or, as you soon learn, you exist only



when you're linked. You search for publicity prior to production, attain promotion prior to practice.

Celebrity authorship is now guiding the work that non-celebrity writers feel they must do. Such self-scaffolding can be reproduced by anyone who aspires to write. Erecting your platform is key, for you are only as credible as you are accessible and you are only as accessible as your media presence allows you to be. It is the triumph of appearance, which is really the triumph of distraction, of the author's otherness. I have heard book doctors and literary agents talk endlessly about platform, the self-establishment of one's self-standing, for which and at which the publisher/editor looks to see the author from a vantage where the author is seen by others, many others, it is hoped. But the platform is suddenly old hat. It has been eclipsed by creating multiplatformed sites that multiply the vantages from which every media-savvy side of the author is seen.

This multiplatforming of the self-decrees that we are credible when our hoped-for accomplishment is prefigured by a place of notoriety or a standing of authority from which the deed, for example, a book I intend to write, is launched. Instead of evaluating myself as a "would-be" writer, I must push and publicize the expectation that I "will be" a credible author. A credible author includes yet goes beyond the writer—or, more accurately, goes *before* the writer writes. In Jungian terms, my multiple platforms, my ability to present my work in summary samples prior to the work's production, and my cheerful self-aggrandizement with doing these many cheerless things creates a space in the world where the work will, even should, exist so that I (or whoever) can then make the work happen.

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Luthien Thye

## Book of Earendil



Lately, I have also found myself being attracted to bits of metals and found items, especially if they are rusted or patina-ed with age. The “aged” theme seems to run in most of my work. Somehow, I am drawn to the beauty of age and decay. For me, items with signs of wear and use, are portals to a different world. A world that once was, a world perhaps before even I existed. I find aged items mysterious, layered and queer as it may sound, romantic. They are also wonderful as a catalyst for weaving new ideas, stories and thoughts, for inspiration. – Luthien Thye

Karl Williams

## CORNERSTONE

"Are you Karl? Great. Look, I was gonna spend the morning with you, but we're short."

He was whispering and pulling a red flannel shirt onto his arm as he came down the steps of the last cabin on the left. It was still pretty dark here, but I could see he had a scraggly beard.

Nancy and I had come up a short hill, through trees and ferns, in the cool, wet air of the summer morning, and into this clearing. There were eight or ten cabins in a half-circle. As he spoke, Nancy went into the second one on the right; she was working with the little ones. This was my first day; I was going to work with the younger boys in that cabin on the left. The clutching in my throat was getting worse.

It was 1971; Cornerstone was a camp for kids with mental retardation, as everyone still put it back then—today, it's: "intellectual disability."

"I'll be in Number Four," he said as he went off, shrugging the shirt onto his shoulders. "You shouldn't have any trouble."

*Right.*

Her roommate at the girls' college had persuaded Nancy to meet me. We'd talked straight through the night until the sun came up. She swept me out of my barren little world. And for that next year everything spun delirious and we held onto to each other and wondered how we'd been so lucky.

After the wedding I watched as Nancy moved effortlessly from school to work. She'd been hired to teach music at Cornerstone. Every night she told me about the kids: she just loved them. When I graduated in May, I tried selling pots and pans for two weeks. That was no good. Now it was June. Nancy was following the kids out to camp as a counselor. I was following Nancy. What else was I going to do?

I went up the two steps of the cabin he'd come out of and opened the screen door. In the half-light I could see clothes and open suitcases everywhere—on bunks, under bunks, in the middle of the floor. By the door the planks of the floor were streaked with grey—mopped at and then left to dry. Someone moaned and turned over. I wanted all of them just to go on sleeping. There was a door opposite. I opened it as quietly as I could and stepped into a tiny, windowless room. In here there was a cot and a mattress, and a duffle bag in the corner, and another door. I went through that one into a bathroom. Dried blue toothpaste on the sink; a rusted can of spray disinfectant and a pair of underpants on a shelf; a soggy roll of toilet paper outside the shower stall; footprints in powder. On a bench by the other door was a tall, green, bound book. Nancy had told me they kept logbooks. I don't know what I'd expected, but it struck me as odd—two rooms in the middle of a cabin; four doors in a row, counting the outside door. My throat had gotten even tighter now. I sat down, picked up the book, and turned to the center where the writing stopped.

"June 7. Movie tonight," read the last entry, "Good day. Walter." *That must've been Walter outside.*

The day before: "June 6, 1971. B. H. cut foot. Saw nurse."

"6/5. Nothing happened today. Susan."

*The whole day? Nothing happened the whole day?*

I heard a thud.

*Here we go.* My heart pounding, I put the book down on the bench and went out to investigate.

He'd fallen on the floor.

"Could you help me?" he said, speaking each word as loudly as if he were calling to me from the next cabin over. "I think I should take a shower."

I was very eager to help him—I didn't want him wake up the other boys. I didn't know what I'd do when they woke up.

When I helped him up, the floor was wet where he'd fallen. From his size, I thought he was in his teens. I was supposed to work with the younger ones, eight-to-ten-year olds...



I had to half-lift him into the shower. He slumped on his elbow on the soap dish; his mouth hung open from shaking. I didn't want to touch his soaked pajama bottoms for the smell, but when I'd helped him out of them I saw that his left leg was permanently bent—he balanced himself on the ball of his foot.

"I'm very sick," he said. "I think I should call my parents to come and get me."

"Maybe that's right," I said. "But first let's see the nurse."

I helped him wash. I found a towel and helped him dry off. I helped him into the underpants from the shelf and then we went out to his bunk to get his clothes.

There was more light now, from two narrow windows by the top bunks, but no sound from anyone. I was hardly breathing—not to stir the air—and hoping he wouldn't decide to speak again. My whole body was afraid of what was coming. But Nancy had done it—I had to do it.

He put his suitcase on the bed; he must be the only one who'd kept his things together. The boy on the top bunk opened his eyes and looked at me—but he was still asleep.

And then, "I want to call my parents to come and get me."

He pronounced each word with full force.

On the top bunk, third down, a head came up.

Next I remember the boys were all dressed and out the door and we'd started down the hill toward the cafeteria with other groups of kids from the other cabins in front of and behind us. I didn't see Nancy. I guess I don't remember how it had happened—how I'd gotten them all washed and dressed and out the door without incident—because of how jam-packed with incident the rest of the summer would be.

Before we'd gone too far Stephen's gait—Stephen was the boy who was sick: one of the other boys had referred to him by name in asking what was wrong—made us fall behind the rest. A group of teenage girls went around us. He walked as though each step were an act of faith which, from long experience, he was now accustomed to make without much thought. He had to fling his left leg into position by using the whole



of the rest of his body. Every time that foot came back to earth his head and shoulders shook a bit. The incline and the rough surface of the trail did not help matters either.

The other boys, all of whom were shorter and, I assumed, younger than Stephen, marked time just ahead of us or fell off to the side to inspect a tree stump or to retrieve a lost frisbee.

Stephen seemed to be feeling a little better and he took up several themes to which he was to return time and again through the rest of the summer.

"I really don't have to stay here," he said. "I'm going to call my parents and they'll come and get me." And then: "Did you know that my father is a surgeon? Last year he made \$80,000. How much money did you make last year?"

"Well," I said, "I didn't make \$80,000, Stephen—I can tell you that much. But then I was in school."

"My mother teaches at Princeton University," he said. "She has a Ph.D. in psychology."

He went on to tell me about his father's "Mercedes-Benz automobile"—Stephen never used a short word or a single word when he could employ a long word or a phrase—and about the family's "vacation house in the Pocono Mountains" where his parents and his sister were going the following week.

By this time I was only half listening. I was watching the other boys who, one by one, began to wander farther and farther from the group. I was considering what I could do to get them all back together when Stephen suddenly stopped both speaking and walking.

"I have to go to the bathroom again," he said. "Right now."

We were a little more than halfway down the hill. The farmhouse Nancy and I had driven by coming in was just in sight. The other groups, even the little ones, had long ago passed us and disappeared behind the trees around a bend. We must be late for breakfast by now. What could I do? Go and get the car and drive him? What would I do with the other boys? Should we turn back to the cabin? But then we'd miss breakfast...

"Stephen, just keep going," I said. "You can use the bathroom in the nurse's office."

"I can't hold it," he said. "I don't think I can hold it."

And he was right.

Still, I thought, we had to push on. I would drop Stephen with the nurse—Nancy had told me the infirmary was in the farmhouse—and then take the rest of the boys to the cafeteria.

I took his arm and we set out again. At the turn we met Walter come back to find us.

"Stephen's sick," I said.

"Oh," he said, meaning that his nose had told him what the trouble was.

Stephen, recognizing a higher authority, went over my head, so to speak, to plead his case.

"Walter," he said. "I'm going to call my parents to come and get me."

"Sure you are, Stephen," Walter said.

To me he said, "Look, I'll take the rest of them over to the cafeteria. You take Stephen to the nurse. It's the door on the left." And he pointed to a screened-in porch on the side of the farmhouse. "Who's ready for breakfast?" he called out to the other boys. Several cheers came back and they all set off at a trot behind him.

In the infirmary a woman stood over a girl at a typewriter. Something obviously needed correction, a lot of it, and the woman, who had streaked grey hair and a fierce look on her face, was making certain that the girl got it straight.

The girl looked up, seeing as how Stephen and I made a fair amount of noise getting through the door, but the woman did not.

"Are you following me?" the woman said in a clipped manner to bring the girl's attention back. She went on, barely controlling her rising temper.

Stephen had lost his legs over the last few yards to the building and now, just inside the door, he was swaying gently between my hands. We stood and waited.

In exasperation, the woman struck, with her index finger, at the page in the typewriter and then, one at a time, at the pages spread out on the desk.

"Here. And here. And here! And here!" she said. "Do you get it now?"

I'd just made up my mind to interrupt them to ask for the nurse, when the woman broke off and looked up at us.

"Stephen Gass," she said. She spoke his name as slowly as she could in order, it seemed to me, to be able to coat the words with as much contempt as possible. "What do you want?"

As she came around the desk toward us, she saw what he wanted. The trouble he'd had on the way down the hill had dripped out from his shorts and down his legs to his socks.

"Don't you come in here pretending to be sick," she said, as if there were only Stephen standing in front of her. "You get yourself back up to that cabin and clean yourself up."

She pulled up in front of him and looked him over, head to toe.

"Look at this," she said. "You're repulsive. It's disgusting. Do you hear me? You disgust me, Mister Gass."

She spoke these words even more slowly and deliberately.

"Now you get yourself out of here and back to that cabin. Now! Go! I don't want to have any more to do with you." And she stepped back past the desk and went through a door into the house.

I looked at the girl. She lowered her eyes and went back to her typing.

I helped Stephen turn around and we went out the door we'd come in. Apparently he'd forgotten to ask about his phone call.

Nancy and I heard the word "dysentery" a week later. It was widely believed that a girl who had worked at the camp for several summers and in the building in Scranton for the past year had called the Department of Health. By this time there were kids sick in every cabin and the infirmary was full. But no one from the outside ever came, that we knew of. The woman Stephen and I had encountered, whose name was

Catherine Roder, turned out to be both the nurse and the director of the camp; I doubted that she ever called anyone. And the girl who'd called the Health Department was gone—she'd quit, it was said—within days.

And so, after-hours and early in the mornings, the counselors—that's what we were called and what we did was called child-care work—jockeyed for the use of the washing machines in the one larger cabin. And at mealtimes and during the day someone stayed behind with everyone too sick to eat or to walk. No one saw a doctor. Another week went by. No one got any sicker. Eventually things got back to normal.

Even in a place like this there was such a thing as normalcy. It was only that first day or two that things struck you as odd. That first day you didn't want to look, didn't want to appear to be staring, but you couldn't keep your eyes off one or two of the kids in each of the groups. The way this boy's mouth hung open at an odd angle, as though from the weight of his lower lip, grabbed at something in your stomach. The way that girl's two eyes were set—strangely askew and the left one protruding from her skull—touched off in you a momentary unnamed terror. It seemed as if you were looking at everything through the bottom of a bottle. But it was in the cafeteria, with everyone assembled, that the place made its full impact. That first day a kind of nausea came on you when it was time to eat. Across the back of the room a young man moved with a bumpy gait, holding in front of him at an odd angle a shriveled arm which hung from his powder-blue shirt. Did the girl at the next table have a double row of teeth in her upper jaw? The little boy three tables over was bald on one side of his head. The young woman at the table next to that one had huge breasts and a perpetual smile on her face. And when she wasn't eating, her tongue hung out of her mouth and rested on her lip. There were mashed potatoes on the edge of her tongue.

But even apart from appearances, there was something different about these kids—that was why they were here at the camp. The flesh you saw was all too fleshy, the bone all too evident. The body parts had been put together in some unusual way. You saw each of the parts independent. They were the same parts you were made up of, but it was all different. Perhaps that was why it affected you so—they were the

same parts that you were made up of. But beyond what you could see, there was something more. One young man's physical appearance, in particular, gave you no clue to any difference—but you were still certain that there must be one. You would, you thought, have to talk to this person in order to decipher that difference, but it certainly existed. There was something that made each of these kids different from what you were yourself—whatever it was you were supposed to be.

And they were all here together, all these kids, some of them very strange-looking kids. And you were here with them. You'd never thought of yourself before as belonging in the world, but now it felt as if you'd been flung to the end of the universe.

But, as I say, after that first day or so the picture righted itself. You saw that the odd way some of the kids appeared to you had as much to do with how they were being cared for as it had to do with their bodies or their mental abilities. For one thing their forms seemed to have been merely covered with clothing. Also, the fact that they were all here together, moving about with their counselors in groups of four or six or sometimes eight, influenced how you perceived each individual. Once you understood this you began to adjust to the everyday feel of this particular place at this particular time. You got on with life. Things settled into normal.

"Normal," here on the grounds of this camp, was a state in which everything that went on gave the impression of having been set up for the exclusive benefit of Catherine Roder and her family. We, the workers and the kids, were, if not quite beside the point, then at the most an inconvenience, countenanced only because we were necessary to the family paycheck and the use of the farmhouse for the summer.

Roder's daughter and her husband had neither her inclination for nor her skill at contempt. They seemed oblivious both to the particulars of their situation and to their family member's resentment of same. They took what had been provided and asked no questions. He spent his time wandering about the grounds with his toolbox, tightening nuts and screws that were not loose and ignoring the torn window screens and the unhinged doors and the dripping showerheads. The little girl, a lanky eight year old, ran around the entire summer stripped to the waist, her straight blond hair flowing out from under a dirty baseball cap, as if she had been marooned on a desert island.

But the Roder baby, being with its mother more often, was present at many of the displays Catherine Roder put on to dramatize her feelings.

One involved an older gentleman who, along with several other men, lived year-round on the floor above the cafeteria, a long cinderblock building. They didn't take part in the activities of the camp; we saw them only at meals.

At some distance from the rest of the assembly a table was kept exclusively for the Roder family. Everyone had to walk past this table when the meal was through to deposit trays and dishes and utensils on a cart near the door to the kitchen.

On this day the husband and the daughter had long since left the table. I myself was farther back in the tangle with my group. Catherine Roder was giving instructions to the activities director. Beside her, in a highchair, sat the baby.

The room was always loudest now, with plates clanking and feet shuffling and voices lifted again. It seemed to me to take forever for this last phase of the meal to come to a close. The line always inched toward the kitchen, with Stephen Gass stumbling along behind, his tray threatening at any moment to capsize; little Michael O'Hala up to no good on his knees under one of the tables; and me holding onto Jerry Sanders' hand for all I was worth as he strained with all his might to break away. Now, with the distraction of the food gone and my group again on its feet, it was, I feared again, obvious to all how little control I had over them.

Two groups ahead of us are the older men. They have nothing to say to one another or to anyone, but they move along in unison. There are four of them. One holds a radio in one hand and his tray in the other. From a plug in his ear a wire dangles to the radio—or maybe it's a hearing aid. One, the tallest of them, wears a plaid sports coat, fully buttoned, and a tie and a green baseball hat. The third man is very short and round with dungarees rolled up at the ankle. A narrow belt cinches the pants far above his waist, so that only the top halves of the three balloons on his T-shirt are visible. The fourth man is tall with steel grey hair very recently wetted and combed.



I put the trays I'm holding down on the edge of the empty table and reach under for Michael O'Hala and, as I'm straightening up, I see the older gentlemen with the grey hair take a step out of the line and toward the highchair.

The baby is looking down at something she's dropped. Catherine Roder is facing the other way, still talking, now with her finger pointed at the activities director, who stands there taking whatever Roder is dishing out with little more than his clipboard to protect him.

The old man bends over and picks up what the baby has dropped—a stuffed rabbit. He is reaching to place it on the tray of the highchair when Roder catches sight of him.

She spins around in her seat.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demands.

The words cut the day in two.

You wouldn't believe that any one person's voice could silence all this noise. But the room goes dead in an instant and all heads turn to see what will happen.

The old man's hand is frozen in mid-air. You can see the panic on his face. What he holds in his hand now seems to be on fire.

What is he to do with it?

It belongs to the baby; he'll give it back to the baby. He completes his motion and puts the toy on the baby's tray.

But this logical movement sets Catherine Roder aflame.

"Don't you touch her things!" she shouts and she swats at the toy to send it flying across the floor, and on the back swing slaps his hand away as if he were himself an infant.

"Get away from her! Now! Move back!"

The old man is too stunned to respond. But the girl who is working with his group comes up directly behind him—as if to shield herself from the wrath spewing from Roder—and pulls him back and away.

"Don't you touch her things, you! Don't you ever come near my child! Don't you come near her with your filthy, dirty hands! Never! Do you hear me? Never!"

Nancy said it wasn't like this in the city. For Mr. Hanrahan, who was in charge there, she felt a certain respect. She saw everyone this way. I mean that she had no veil of vague disapproval to get through first. She saw each person she met with a kind of clarity. The way she'd seen me.

Hanrahan was in a difficult situation. Cornerstone Residence was a large building downtown next to the Scranton Academy Theater. It was Hanrahan's job to keep the lid on things there, while at the same time dealing with the powers-that-be: the City and the State and Mr. Holland, who had bankrolled the place. Holland had set all this in motion by creating what was called an "agency." Cornerstone. Cornerstone consisted of the building in the city and this camp. There were other agencies and camps. And there were social workers who "placed" kids like these in "facilities"—like Cornerstone Residence. Together all of it made up a "system" that "provided services" to children like these.

In the summer all the kids moved out to the camp, vacating the building in the city, which was in turn filled with "respite cases." I didn't quite get what that meant. But the whole set-up was wrong. Nancy and I both recognized that.

We'd agreed on everything right from the start: religion and families and the war and the future. It wasn't so much agreement, though—it was as if we'd always known each other. But that's not it either, really. It was just that nothing was jagged. Nothing. It all fit together. All of it. It had been right before we even knew it existed. That's what we thought.

My group consisted of six boys and Stephen Gass. I figured that Stephen had been placed in this group because the older boys might have eaten him alive.

Jerry Sanders, ten years old with chalky black skin, had a preoccupation with movement. He was in constant motion himself and he had a morbid and persistent desire to see things and other people in motion. The more violent the results of that motion the better. He wanted cars to crash, planes to fall from the sky, boats to collide,

animals to run in terror. But most of all he wanted to see people fighting. Lacking this, he would settle for sports.

Within a week and a half of his arrival Jimmy Samitsky knew the vital information of every adult on the grounds. Other than this he had no interests whatsoever. He collected his data in a sort of interview he conducted in a singsong voice with each new person he encountered. "Whir d'ya live? What's yer phone number? When's yer birthday?"

Mario DeBrutis was a soft, chubby kid with curly black hair. He had a smile for everyone and everything. He spent ten weeks with us before his mother came for him; I was certain she had no idea what went on at this camp.

The fourth boy was Eric Ingram. Eric was with us the whole summer, but you might also have said that he was never really with us even for an hour. He would hold an oar or a crayon if you placed it in his hand, but that was about it. Instead, as he followed us along, he would clap his approval or laugh beatifically—perhaps at some joke the clouds whispered to him. He was a human whirligig: he twirled his fingers and his arms in the air; he spun around in place; he pivoted at the waist in a rocking motion; his head bobbed and weaved; his eyeballs floated around in his skull; his wispy hair bounced gracefully on his forehead when he jumped up and down on his tiptoes.

And then there were Michael O'Hala and Bobby Hart.

O'Hala was the one who kicked off the summer for me, you might say. On my second day we went for a hike on one of the trails through the woods; this was after archery and before lunch. We came upon a clearing and off to the right, down a little bank, ran a stream. Jerry was, as usual, way ahead of us; he'd already gone through the clearing and was just out of sight down the trail. Stephen Gass, still sick, had stayed behind at the cabin. I called to Jerry to come back and I was waiting to see if he would respond, when Michael O'Hala threw the plastic bat he was carrying—and which, much to Jerry's delight, he had applied to Mario's head earlier in the day—into the stream.

When Michael wouldn't, I went down to retrieve it.

I was squatting on the rocks at the edge of the stream reaching for the bat, when Michael came up behind me and pushed me over into the water.

You might say I was in and out of that water for the rest of the summer. Most of the time it was all I could do to gain their attention, much less to direct them. When their eyes opened in the morning they were off and running as if I didn't exist. The only attention I had I didn't particularly care for any more of—namely that of Mr. Gass. His monologue went on incessantly in my ear while I chased the rest of the boys from one end of the summer to the other.

Bobby Hart, the seventh boy, was, to my way of thinking, the soul of our little dis-organization, the little boy of the storybooks, wide-eyed and brimming over with wonder and interest at the world of nature. His body was lean and brown from the sun and you had to get up real close to hear what he had to say. Usually it was only one word: "Frog."

Bobby discovered the pond, I think, before he even got off the bus. What he wanted to do, all day and every day, was to catch frogs. Trouble was there was no frog-catching on the schedule. Swimming in the crowded pool; archery with, after a week or so, one lone arrow and a bow with a frayed string; a tractor ride around an unplanted brown field. All these things, yes. They were on the schedule. But no frog-catching. And of course Bobby had to go where the rest of us went—that was how things were to be done. There was no greater crime than "losing somebody." On Tuesdays and Thursdays at 10:15 we had a group ride in the boat in the pond. But we could never leave Bobby at the side of the pond with his frogs. So, Bobby, the frogs will just have to wait—we're due at arts-and-crafts in two minutes.

We passed by that pond a hundred times a day, because it lay on the path between the cabins and the rest of the camp. And Bobby would gaze lovingly each time we made our way by.

"Frogs?"

No, Bobby, there's no time for frogs.

But why? If Bobby wanted to catch frogs all day, wasn't that what he should be doing? After all frog catching was perfectly suited to this place and to this season and to this time in Bobby's life. Why was it exactly that Bobby couldn't catch frogs? Well, it was because he had to stay with his group. And why did he have to stay with the

group? Well, it was because he might wander off if he were left on his own. Yes, there was the chance that he might wander off, but wasn't that chance worth taking for the joy it would bring him? Didn't he have the right to decide what he wanted to do with his time? No, he might wander off and we can't let that happen because...well, because you know what Bobby is. We have to protect him from himself.

All right, so even if, granted, he might wander off. Still there must be another way to handle the situation. For example, there must be other kids here who would like nothing better than to spend all day and every day at the pond—in the boat if not catching frogs. Why couldn't some one of the workers stay at the pond, someone else at arts and crafts, someone else at archery? Or if that was unworkable, then why couldn't all of us keep an eye on all of the kids—let them go and do what they want and each one of us take charge of whatever kids came our way? Or better yet, why not simply have someone stay near Bobby all day? But this last solution, perhaps the best one, was so ridiculous as not even to be contemplated. For it would, needless to say, cost too much money.

These were the kinds of questions that Nancy and I began to work through from the first. It all made no sense to us. But then again it made perfect sense. It made no sense only if you followed through with logic based on the premise presented to the outside world: that the camp was set up for the kids. But plainly the only people in the entire universe that the camp was not set up for were the kids. The camp was set exactly against anything that might benefit the kids. They were thrown together in large groups under the care of people who had no access to any but the most rudimentary information about them. They were dragged from one meaningless activity to another. Even if we had a ball and bat, Jerry's interest in baseball was irreparably hobbled by Stephen Gass' disdain for the sport, by Eric Ingram's inability to hold the bat in a way that did not remind you of a butterfly net, and by Mario's insistence on running from home to third even if he had missed the ball completely. What did Michael O'Hala want with a picture of a rainbow, even if he had drawn it himself? He'd drawn it under duress. We simply had to keep him occupied until the next activity. Wherever each of these kids was—and each one was most decidedly in his own world (my greatest and

only achievement of the summer were the ten continuous minutes during which Jerry and Michael threw a frisbee back and forth outside the cabin)—the activities might just as well have been located in a separate universe. A universe none of them could get to. I certainly didn't know how to transport them there.

No, the camp was not set up for the kids. It was set up for the adults.

It was set up for the workers, so that they would have to think as little as possible through the course of the day, make the fewest number of decisions. The workers took this arrangement on gladly, Nancy and I thought. They wanted to work in this way; they wanted to go mindlessly from one task to the next, in perpetual meaningless movement, until the end came.

And if the worker was content, even eager, for regimen and predictability, this made the administrator's job easier too. The administrator—Roder or the activities director—had only to see, then, that the worker was in the right place at the right time with the right people, the group to which he or she had been assigned. It didn't matter what happened, or indeed if nothing happened—in the sense of anything worthwhile—so long as the kids were in no worse shape at the end of the summer than they'd been at the start. No one could expect anyone to actually do anything with kids like these. We were only all to pretend that it wasn't hopeless—just to keep the whole thing afloat. The only thing that mattered, then, was that the worker and the group were where they were supposed to be, when they were supposed to be there. What could be simpler? Again, no need for thought, question, decision. It was a streamlined system. The money came in; the pantomime was performed; everyone kept their mouths shut; the money was distributed; and at the end of the summer we'd all go home. What matter that this little arrangement may chew up those it was purportedly intended to serve? It worked well from the administrator's point of view. That was more than enough.

It was set up for Holland. Was he making money? Or was all this just a tax write-off? If he was simply a man intent on doing good, he wasn't paying much attention to the apparatus he'd set in motion. Maybe just enough attention to keep his name out of the papers.



It was set up for the parents. What worse a fate than to be stuck with a child the like of these? A respite from such a situation—if a better or even a permanent reprieve hadn't been arranged yet—that was the only answer.

And it was set up so that the sensibilities of Mr. and Mrs. John Q. would be safeguarded. Wasn't it written down somewhere in the Bill of Rights that Americans were inalienably entitled not to be accosted by anything that might disturb them? And the better the neighborhood in which an American found himself, the lesser the provocation necessary to call forth an action necessary to defend said right. So, Mario had only to demonstrate that he could not distinguish an "a" from a "q" in order to be packed off, whereas Jerry E., one of Walter's senior boys for the summer, had to resort to hitting his mother with a chair in order to win his place in the sun.

What I wanted to do was to take Bobby to the pond each morning and say, "Bobby, the day is yours. Happy frogs." Instead, I rounded him up and drove him with the rest of my herd from one activity to the next.

Activity. That was the word we used. That was the lie in its local form. No one was active, apart from just moving about. How could seven boys learn to row one boat? There was no way to design an activity so that it included—actively—all the kids in one group. There were no two kids in the whole of that camp who belonged together. It wasn't just that little Michael had boundless energy while Stephen always lagged behind. Or that Stephen could play a decent game of checkers, while Bobby would give no evidence even that he could distinguish the red from the black squares. It was that they didn't understand, any of them, the idea of collaboration. To each of them the principle of the world was egocentricity and they acted, or tried to act, accordingly. The doctors said they weren't smart enough to function in the world. I couldn't say that was not true, the world being what it was, but it was also true that they refused to toe the line with the rest of us. Maybe this and not the other was the real reason why they were turned away.

Maybe too we see something of our own situation in them. They are born to a world they can't understand—the world of men. They have not the wherewithal to deal with this world; they cannot make their way in this world. We quickly lose patience with

them. The ones who make their best efforts to come to terms with human society, though still never quite getting it, we scorn and call fools. The others we've "put away"—and it's still being done in some states—so we won't have to look at them.

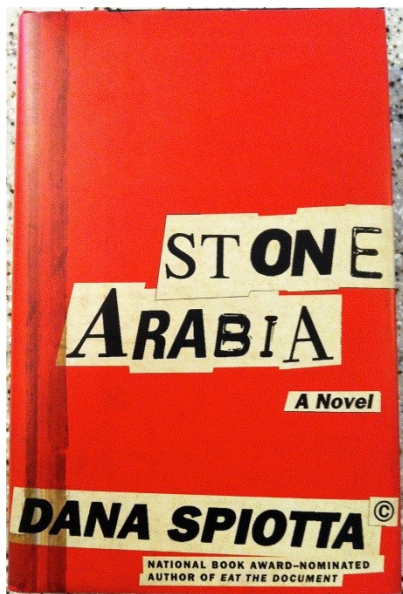
But as they stand to the world of men, so we stand in the face of the universe. In this larger realm, we are the fools, though we never even consider that this might be the case. In this wider realm we're the ones who don't get it. How do we react to our own situation? We give it up as useless at the start, denying that there is any reality but the little human one we find ourselves embedded in. We have not the courage to confront all of creation; instead, we give ourselves over to the lie that this immense yawning mystery simply does not exist behind and around and underneath the universe—even inside the world of men. We create smaller universes to deal with. We count the stars and, telling ourselves that what we can see or hypothesize is all that there is, we congratulate ourselves on our advances. We subjugate our fellows and, counting ourselves as gods in a lesser world, we blot out the larger one. We paper over the windows of our cells with money. We drown out the encompassing silence with prayers. But the real truth of creation is closed to us, whether we acknowledge that fact or not, as closed as is the world of men to these others among us. Perhaps it is true then that they mock us by their very existence. They show us what we truly are, how little we truly know. But more than this, there is the grace with which they handle their own situations.

Perhaps they mock us in this respect, too.

Kilean Kennedy

## *Stone Arabia* by Dana Spiotta

The act of cataloging and collecting, be it LPs, underground comics, or miniature garden gnomes wielding medieval weaponry, no matter the grain of the object, is in its own geeky way a form of creation, supplying life and even a kind of physicality to one's own mania. Dana Spiotta's novel *Stone Arabia*, her third, goes that idea one better, resulting in a powerfully fine object itself: a novel of acute focus on the relationship between a middle-aged woman and her brother, and his lifelong obsession.



In this case Nik, the brother of the narrator Denise, harbors an abiding infatuation with his own career as a musician, spanning numerous bands and solo projects over many years. And this obsession, as any true collector won't be surprised to recognize, includes the ownership of every item ever created that's in any way related to this career, anything that could imaginably be possessed and gathered to form a mountainous cache of band-related items that crowds Nik's garage-cum-studio. And every single bit of it is invented. Volumes and volumes of lore and yes, even Nik's own music, all authored/played and recorded and curated by Nik and Nik alone.

Near the beginning of the book, by means of a pretty cunning pathway into the world and minds of both Nik and his sister, Spiotta begins a section in which it's not exactly clear who's telling the story. This starts with Denise reading a letter, written by Nik, posing as her and writing in her voice, to her daughter. At first Denise is not terribly surprised Nik has written, has *made* something like this, but she is annoyed by it. An annoyance that soon gives way to slight astonishment at his exaggerated rendering of details from her past and his understanding, sometimes harsh but no less truthful, of her behavior, and one particular incident when she was younger that hinted

at a possible future in the arts as an actress. It's a personal and expressive letter, and she didn't even write it.

Nik is missing throughout the novel, having recently disappeared without a trace he's only seen in recollected events triggered by close study of what he's left behind, which it becomes clearer and clearer, is exactly as he intended. Among what he's left are several volumes of his assembled work called *The Chronicles*, now placed squarely in the hands of his little sister Denise, a 47 year-old, somewhat happy though disappointed, divorced mother with an infrequent male companion that she enjoys but doesn't quite love. There are other characters, including an ailing mother as well as Denise's daughter, a well-meaning college student working on a documentary about her uncle and his work. And there were indications, such as his failing health and shortage of money, and lack of a current girlfriend ("*Nik always had a girlfriend*"), that Nik wanted to escape his current life, and maybe for good. When Denise comes to accept his absence she does so with a sense of finality:

She knew he wouldn't be looking back. He wanted to be rid of all of it. Maybe he wanted the freedom to be whatever he wanted to be now, and that required jettisoning all his past work, all his past. He wanted what it was like when he began, before all of it had piled up into a long life.

While it may seem difficult to form an emotional tether to a character like Nik, the affect of his absence on Denise is really what's admirable here. It surpasses sibling love, or sidesteps it, and becomes a conduit for her to examine her own past, her memories, what kind of life she has now and what she's done with herself. Personal aspirations and histories are always in revision, changing right along with the passage of time, and the changes usually aren't welcomed. But if the act of composing, the need to create, is indeed an act of discovery and foremost an attempt to tease a little sense from the world, any world, then it's hard to imagine a better example than a man like Nik and his *Chronicles*.

The novel has one narrator but at times alternates between the first and third person, which helps elucidate the story as it's happening: Denise begins writing her

own version of events while also reading through her brother's documents. It makes for a sad tale told beautifully and it's hard not to be awed by the amount of time and detail Nik put into his life's work, including everything imaginable from album titles and song lyrics, set lists and handbills for shows that never happened/existed. There's even a biography written about Nik's alter ego penned by a fictional author. It's a rich enough trove of ephemera to pique the reader and strike more than one or two sparks of recognition – not a stretch to imagine anyone that's picked up this book doesn't have, say, one or two compulsions or preoccupations with finely wrought works of art, including novels.

Even more fascinating is to consider Spiotta had to create all of this material. And it's not just a forum to showcase her imaginative talents as a writer, though it does that job nicely. The exploration of these objects, this fantasy world created and perpetuated by the character of Nik, gives those left behind, mainly his sister, a definitive timeline mapping out the course of his life – one crowded and ruled by his own voluminous output, shared with an audience of only one or two, and lived almost entirely alone.

Haris Merzihic

## Undertaker



All of the art I create can be put into one of two categories. The art is either personal, which means the art relates to an experience or event I have experience in my personal life. Or the art is artistic, which means the art is created for artistic purposes. Personal life art is realistic and can easily be interpreted by anyone who knows me. It might be a work depicting a Bosnian town or a soccer player. Those are things that have meaning in my life. Artistic works can be abstract at times but are still realistic most of the time. There really is no meaning behind them and there is nothing to interpret. They are simply works of art done to express an artistic idea. The photographs would fall in the category of artistic works. Personal art is more important to me and is the art that I was "born with" that helps me relax, whereas artistic art was learned and is done conscientiously. – Haris Merzihic



## A Goddess

as I stood by a perfumed pond  
a woman appeared and said to me  
I am a liar and that is the truth  
do you believe me?  
I said yes

she smiled and whispered in my ear  
do you love me and trust me?  
I said yes

she was a goddess  
she was lying  
I was not  
I am too human

Luthien Thye

## Book of the Brotherhood



I am so attached to these aged beauties that when I cannot find the perfect rusty piece, I have no qualms in making them myself. Frequently I find myself nicking vinegar and salt from the kitchen at the wee hours of the morning just to rust a piece of metal washer. Or make a cup of coffee, not for drinking, but for aging my papers. The act of aging is an act of transformation. And for me, watching this transformation occur is meditative as well as reflective. It reminds me of how fragile we are ...

even as unyielding as metal is, given the right conditions (time, or vinegar and salt), it too cannot avoid the course of decay. What more with human life. – Luthien Thye

Ann T. Welch

## Windy Van Hooten

When Jenilind drifted up out of sleep and saw her baby for the first time. She smiled and said, "Windy Van Hooten."

"That's an odd name for a baby," the nurse said and made an adjustment in Jenilind's I.V.

Jenilind returned to her dreams.

A sun shower passes through a room. Veins of copper sparkle in the burgundy walls. The air is fresh with new life. Beneath a gauzy canopy on a four-poster bed curl a mother and her child. The child wears a nightgown of blushing pink. On one foot is a yellow sock with brown monkeys in red vests and red felt hats with gold tassels. The child's other foot is bare, her toes thin and blue-veined.

The mother is a storyteller. She is in shadow. Her words are bubbles that float and hold the reds of summer—cherry, watermelon, strawberry. On their journey, the words meet and merge, sharing walls as babies in a womb, and carry the mother's story unbroken to her child, who is in light.

"In Windy Van Hooten's Most Perfect, Perfect, Perfect Circus everything is perfect. The performers are never frightened, never cold or wet; they are never hot and they are never thirsty or hungry; they're never, ever lonely and they all get paid on time and they all have been reading newspapers in every language since they were one year old."

The child holds out her hand and when a word lands she tries to pop it with her tongue but she cannot.

Her mother laughs. "Your tongue shimmers gold like everyone's does in Windy Van Hooten's. Their speech pleases as the song of the Swedish Nightingale and you know who she is."

"Me!" the little girl says, now on her back, and bicycles her feet wildly in the air.

To bring calm, the mother runs her fingers through her child's corn-silken hair. "Guess where all these performers grew up?"

The pink hue of the child's nightgown changes to ladybug red. The gown swirls around her body. She kicks her sock-covered foot free. The monkeys on her sock jump up and down, their gold tassels swinging. "Tell us, tell us," they screech.

The mother ignores the monkeys. She sees her child is missing a sock. Pairs separated are pairs lost. Her child tugs at her arm. "Where did they grow up?" The mother pushes away what she knows she has lost and turns to what she has. She touches the dear tip of her child's nose. "They all grew up in Hollywood, right next to the movie stars."

Serious purpose tiptoes across the little girl's face. "What are their families like?"

The mother touches the dip at the base of her child's throat, a hollow she loves. "They are what you want them to be."

The little girl brushes her mother's hand away and presses her lips together.

"What would you like them to be, my child?" The mother ends her whispers with the gentling swoosh of wind through pines.

The tight line of her child's lips does not escape the mother's notice; her child has searched but found no answer.

Now the mother puts a jester's dance in her voice: "Their brothers are elephants; their sisters, lions. Burly curly bears are their uncles; polka-dotted zebras their aunts and, oh my! a clapping colony of sea lions are their cousins. Their mothers are horses with great arching, candy-cane necks and their fathers are lions with sunbeams for their manes. How fast they chase around in circles, making a counter too dizzy to count. That's why nobody knows how many brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and cousins a Windy Van Hooten performer has."

The air the little girl is holding bursts out in giggles; her body relaxes. She claps her feet together but after a moment, stops. She points at her bare foot and starts to cry.

To make her child see in another way, the mother speaks a stream of poet bubbles: "Tents of sunshine, nets of clouds, floors of kingfisher feathers glittering blue—"

The little girl wriggles her sock-clad foot and the monkeys hold their tummies from bursting apart in giggles. "Impossible," the monkeys hoot.

"Anything is possible in Windy Van Hooten's Most Perfect, Perfect, Perfect Circus as long as it's perfect."

A shimmering word lands on the child's fingertip. Inside the sphere the child sees the Windy Van Hooten Circus. She pokes her finger into the bubble. But her mother's words are perfect, with just the right amount of tension to keep the bubble from popping. The child yawns and turns on her side, her feet tuck up under her nightgown, her rosy cheek rests on folded hands that gleam white against the pomegranate red sheet. Her eyelids droop low in contented smile.

Her child is finished, the mother thinks. She moves to leave but her child asks for more. The mother has never told a story before and cannot believe the beauty she is making. She continues as much for herself as for her child.

"The lights shine from the Windy Van Hooten cookhouse day and night, welcoming anyone who is hungry. 'Come in, put up the feet and eat in happy company,' these lights say.

The little girl flops to her back, head resting on hands, one leg over the other. She swings her sock-clad foot up and down. The monkeys scream, "Lights can't talk, we know that."

The mother knows her child wants to be told they can just like she wants to be told there is a Santa Claus. "But these are the cookhouse lights of Windy Van Hooten's, you see, and they speak to those who are good listeners, like you."

The smile on the child's face is soft. She snuggles close to her mother and sucks her thumb in steady, fast rhythm; her other hand curls around her ear like a little old man trying to catch words.

"Oh the food in the cookhouse, my darling! Lutfisk, falukorv, blodkorv, Velveeta, inkokt lax, fiskbullar, Biff Stroganoff, Chef Boy-Ardee Spaghetti, julskinka, fresh heavy

cream and all the milk you can drink, french fries, lingonberry jam, kaldolmar, ostkake, Cracker Jacks with a prize in every box, bilberry soup, Coca Cola, grisfotter, Hostess Twinkies, cardamom buns, kanelbulle, corn flakes with berries picked in June on top, sirapslimpa, chokladboll, kringla, polagris, and most importantly, Underwood Deviled Ham.

"I will tell you a secret, my child, about the cookhouse if you promise never to tell."

The little girl sucks her thumb more slowly.

"Do you want to know what you'll never ever ever, ever, ever, ever see in the cookhouse?"

The little girl nods her head; her eyes never leave her mother's. The hand that curled her ear moves to her hair and twirls golden strands around her fingers, strands that gleam to red.

The mother looks over her shoulder as if to make sure there is no one to hear. "You must promise."

The little girl untangles her fingers and makes a fast, sharp cross over her heart.

The mother leans close and whispers, "Lima beans."

The little girl's eyebrows shoot up. She takes her thumb out of her mouth and smiles a gapped-tooth smile. The monkeys on her sock chatter, "They got candy?"

"Cherry suckers. Strawberry licorice. Atomic Fire Balls and Redhots." The mother watches the blaze of her child's smile die and leans in to protect but does not know what she is protecting her child from.

Her child stiffens. "It's not open at 2:15 p.m. I know."

The mother butterfly-kisses the knuckles of her little girl's hand, now tinged pink. "Yes, most especially, it is open at that time. Bakers in rocking chairs next to their stove, their chins grazing their chests as they nod in half sleep, wait for their breads to bake. The cookhouse is never closed at Windy Van Hooten's. All you must do is think Windy Van Hooten."

Glittering scarlet stars appear over their heads. Monkeys swing from star to star. The child presses her back into the mother's arms. The two are silent; the mother feels



the expanding and collapsing of her child's ribs in heavy sigh. The mother sees the monkeys on the sock her child wears and wonders where the monkeys overhead have come from. When she calls them to come down, they disappear.

The child says, "What are those things?"

"What things?" the mother says.

"Falukorv and ostake and grisfotter?"

The mother smiles in the dark. Her child hears a word only once and can pronounce it correctly, always.

When the mother tries to answer, she cannot. She does not remember what those strange words mean. The copper-fresh air thickens. The mother is sad. She is losing her story. "It is time to sleep," she says. The words hold no life, no tension.

"More," the child says.

The mother does not answer.

"Tell me."

"Hush. I must go now." She begins to ease her arm out from her child's head. The child knows what to do. She puts her head on her mother's arm and makes a sound, pretending a bad dream. The mother curls closer. "I'm here." The child ducks her chin to hide her smile.

The mother forces words that do not want to come. In hoarse whisper, she gives the story the ending she has always wanted: "There are no frowns, no wrong words spoken, no words not understood. Everyone has families and everyone has stories. In Windy Van Hooten's Most Perfect, Perfect, Perfect Circus everything works out. Just the way it should."

The mother knows her story is gone. But she is content; she has told it well. She curls close touching her chin to her child's shoulder. Sleep pushes all sides of her in closer and closer. She wants them to meet so she can disappear but there is a kernel, tiny, hard and sharp that won't permit closure. She grows restless. Her eyes open. She sits. Something is wrong. Her eyes dart about. The bare foot of her child, that is the kernel that cuts. Everybody in Windy Van Hooten's Circus wears two socks.

"Where is the other sock?" she wants to scream but can't. She is awash in crimson flow.

Jenilind jerked awake. A man was talking to her.

"Fragments of placenta left behind... couldn't stop the bleeding....too much blood lost...no other choice but to--"

With unearthly strength, Jenilind gripped the doctor's wrist. "Where's the monkey sock?"

When Jenilind next awoke, the nurse whispered the word hysterectomy in her ear.

Minutes later or had a week passed, a new season come or maybe just a new day, she didn't know, the doctor still talked.

"The uterus makes babies and bleeds; that's what it does. Yours made one very fine baby. Then the bleeding."

"You stole my sock."

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Jenilind?"

Jenilind rolled her head on the pillow; her eyes sought escape at the window. Pale sunlight, watching her with a sly smile, stood on the other side of the pane. Like things of dreams do, the sock had vanished. Hollowed out, echoes bounced inside of her.

"What's wrong with me?"

"The previous c-section you had is the reason your uterine wall collapsed. How many other children do you have?"

A.M. O'Malley

## Everything Can Not Be Terrific

I asked her, thirty-five years later, why she had married that man. I asked her, reminded her that she had been 17 and not even pregnant. In 1976 women were burning things; tuna casseroles, maiden form bras, their lips on roach clips. She had younger sisters. She had older brothers. I asked her with a pen in hand, my feet curled under me, we sat in soft chairs and I resisted the urge to look over her sad head at the wood paneling, past her, through her. I asked her again, the answer was something about beer in frosted mugs, older boys in high waisted jeans with trucks, shorts so short that they required constant extraction, going fishing in tapered sunlight. Gary Hartung—the name rolled around between us. It rained on their wedding day. Valentines Day. She had danced with her father in the Elks Lodge. She wore a veil like the one from her first holy communion, scalloped around her dark hair. Rain on your wedding day means good luck, or travel, or something about money. I asked her about the fire, we still had things that smelled like smoke. There was a fire on their wedding night. The window piled with weddings gifts. She had lain on the bed, drunk with her wedding. There was a fire somewhere down the hall, everyone in the hotel woke to thickened air. I asked about when he left her in the stairwell, she had mentioned that once. At the wedding her bridesmaids wore dusty rose, bell sleeves, hair parted in the middle, flowing down like so many Virgin Marys. There is just one photograph; she is almost off the frame, but smiling with her eyes cast upon her hand in his hand. I never met him, Gary Hartung, but she says that once I did.

Haris Merzihic

## Toy Car



The approach I take to the art I create depends on whether the art is personal or artistic. Personal art comes from inside, there is really no planning for it, usually it just starts out as a sketch and develops into an art work. Of course I still have several drafts of it before it becomes the final work, but there is less thought involved and more emotional input. With artistic works, there is planning and idea generating. Usually there is an external inspiration or a mix of ideas that moves me to create the work. There is thought put into how the final piece will look and several different drafts of the work will be produced, from which the final is selected. It is done for the purpose of the viewer. The photography of toys project came to me from a love of illusionistic work and psychology. The idea of making the viewer think that s/he knows what s/he's looking at, at first glance when there is really something more to it that can only be noticed when one takes his/her time to observe the work, appealed to me.

— Haris Merzihic

Rosalind Brenner

## Medea

You should have slit my belly,  
dropped the fetus  
into the mouth of a wolf,  
let fangs grind our child  
the way your gluttony  
drove you to gorge on doll flesh.

Forgive you?

You chained me to our bed  
then snuffed me like a gnat.

I, who anointed your eyes with salve,  
I, who savaged your enemies,  
my sorcery so wrapped in hero worship  
I would kill for you.

Watch the news tomorrow.  
That's our jeep in the river.  
Search the nursery.

## Contributor Notes

**ROSALIND BRENNER** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence College. Her poems have been published in *The Cortland Review*, *Poetry Bay*, *The Southampton Review*, *Long Island Sounds*, *Walt's Corner in The Long Islander*, *Taproot Journal*, *Performance Poets Association Literary Review*, Cave Moon Press' anthology of poems about food for their hunger project, *Broken Circles*. She has three poems in the *Arroyo Literary Review* Spring 2011. She won Honorable Mention in *Long Island Quarterly's* Gertrude Stein "look-alike" contest, second prize in *The North Sea Poetry Scene* poetry contest and second prize in Farmingdale's Long Island poetry contest. She received two Honorable Mentions in The New Millennium national contest, one for essay, one for poetry.

**VALENTINA CANO** is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time either writing or reading. Her works have appeared in *Exercise Bowler*, *Blinking Cursor*, *Theory Train*, *Magnolia's Press*, *Cartier Street Press*, *Berg Gasse 19*, *Precious Metals* and will appear in the upcoming editions *A Handful of Dust*, *The Scarlet Sound*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Perceptions Literary Magazine*, *Welcome to Wherever*, *The Corner Club Press*, *Death Rattle*, *Danse Macabre*, *Subliminal Interiors*, *Generations Literary Journal*, *Super Poetry Highway*, *Stream Press*, *Stone Telling*, *Popshot* and *Perhaps I'm Wrong About the World*. You can find her here: <http://coldbloodedlives.blogspot.com>

**KIMBERLY DARK** is a writer, mother, performer and professor. She is the author of five award-winning solo performance scripts and her poetry and prose appear in a number of publications. For more than ten years, Kimberly has inspired audiences in fancy theatres, esteemed universities and fabulous festivals. She tours widely in North America and Europe—anywhere an audience loves a well-told story. *The Salt Lake Tribune* in Utah says "Dark doesn't shy away from provocative, incendiary statements, but don't expect a rant. Her shows, leavened with humor, are more likely to explore how small everyday moments can inform the arc of our lives." The *High Plains Reader*

in Fargo, North Dakota says "Dark's skill as a storyteller gets to your heart by exposing hers." You can find more from her here: [www.kimberlydark.com](http://www.kimberlydark.com)

**THOMAS LARSON** is the author of *The Saddest Music Ever Written: The Story of Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings"* and *The Memoir and the Memoirist*. His website is [www.thomaslarson.com](http://www.thomaslarson.com)

**HARIS MERZIHIC** Born in Bosanski Novi, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moved to Croatia in 1991 due to the outbreak of a war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moved to Germany in 1993 and lived there for 6.5 years. Moved to the Erie, PA in 1999. Attended Collegiate Academy high school and Mercyhurst College. Graduated from Mercyhurst with a B.A. in the field of Graphic Design. Haris works at FMC Technologies as a graphic designer.

**A.M. O'MALLEY** is a poet and zinester living in Portland, OR. She teaches Creative Writing through the University of Oregon and The Independent Publishing Resource Center. She is currently working on a book project called *Tiny Bones*.

**SUCHOON MO** is a Korean War veteran and a retired academic living in the semi-arid part of Colorado. His poems and music compositions appeared in a number of literary and cultural publications.

**MARIAN KAPLUN SHAPIRO** is the author of a professional book, *Second Childhood* (Norton, 1988), a poetry book, *Players In The Dream, Dreamers In The Play* (Plain View Press, 2007) and two chapbooks: *Your Third Wish*, (Finishing Line, 2007); and *The End Of The World, Announced On Wednesday* (Pudding House, 2007). As a Quaker and a psychologist, her poetry often addresses the embedded topics of peace and violence, often by addressing one within the context of the other. A resident of Lexington, she was named Senior Poet Laureate of Massachusetts in 2006, in 2008, in 2010, and 2011.



**CLAUDE CLAYTON SMITH** is the Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University. He is the author of a historical novel, two children's books, four books of creative nonfiction, and serves as co-editor/translator of the world's first anthology of Native Siberian literature. He has published more than fifty poems and a variety of short fiction, essays, and reviews. Four of his plays have been selected for production in competition. His work has been translated into five languages, including Russian and Chinese. He holds a BA from Wesleyan (CT), an MAT from Yale, an MFA in fiction from the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and a DA from Carnegie-Mellon. His latest book is *Ohio Outback: Learning to Love the Great Black Swamp* (Kent State University Press, 2010).

**LUTHIEN THYE** After graduating in Accounting & Economics, Luthien returned home to Malaysia where she worked about six hours in a business firm before quitting, and was absolutely convinced that she should be doing something else. So she pursued her first love ... the Stage. After many years performing as well as directing shows, she did what her heart wanted to do next ... fall in love and start a family. Being a mom to two amazing girls left her no time for the grueling schedules of the stage or its rehearsals, so making art followed as she had to find another way to express her emotions, thoughts, muse, and self. If someone were to ask her, what the one tool she cannot do without was, it would have to be her imagination. She is chiefly inspired by fantasy. When she reads a book or watches a movie about a different world, or perhaps, a journey of exploration, her imagination continues to weave stories and characters even after the book or the movie ends, and from these stories, her pieces manifest. For more of Luthien's art, see her website <http://alteredalchemy.com> or her Etsy Store <http://alteredalchemy.etsy.com>.

**ANN T. WELCH** earned her MFA in Writing from Spaulding University and is a member of The Cincinnati Writers Project. She divides her time between Bellaire, Michigan and Cincinnati, Ohio.

**KARL WILLIAMS** has published two books with leaders in the self-advocacy movement (the civil rights work of people with intellectual disabilities); a play based on one of these books premiered in San Diego last year. Williams' work has appeared in magazines and books, as well as in videos and on websites. Songs from his five CDs have aired on NBC, Fox, and on German TV, and on radio stations around the world.